

News Article
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FORAGE OPTIONS FOR DROUGHT STRESSED CATTLE FARMS

Coosa County and much of Alabama has just gone through one of the worse droughts in several years. The last really bad drought was in 2000, when hay became so short the National Guard was called in to help bring in donated hay from other regions. In the last few weeks, many areas around the county are finally getting some relief with small showers. However, the drought and its effects are by no means over. Ponds are low, hay supplies are short and pasture and hayfields are just slowly responding to the limited showers over the area. While I have not heard any suggestion of another “hay-lift”, there are some things a cattle producer can do to boost his forage reserves for this winter. Below are some suggestions provided by Dr. Don Ball, Darrell Rankins and Tim Reed that may be helpful.

Cattle are ruminants and thus need some forage (fiber) in their daily diet. In general, the minimal amount required is about 0.5% of body weight which would equate to 5 to 6 pounds for 1,000 to 1,200-pound cows. Cattle producers are considering their options for producing emergency grass for their cattle. It is getting late to plant a summer annual, but the best option if one chooses this strategy would be to plant browntop millet and hope a rain comes soon and gives you quick stand establishment. If rains come in August you should be able to get some grazing or one cutting from the millet. The millet will produce seed about 60 to 75 days after emergence. Browntop millet can accumulate excessive levels of nitrate during dry conditions. If it remains dry after your millet emerges it is advisable to send a sample to the Auburn University Ag Lab and have the nitrate level checked before allowing animals to eat it.

Farmers may also be able to get some more production from their bermudagrass pastures and hayfields if rains come in August and September. Bermuda yields can be increased by applying 60 to 100 lbs. of nitrogen (N) per acre by September 1. Once the days begin to shorten and the temperatures start cooling down bermudagrass growth will stall usually by the end of October. Farmers can also increase their chances of additional grass production by applying 60 to 80 pounds of N per acre to fescue in early September. If rains come in September additional grass will be available by October. If the fescue is not immediately needed it can be stockpiled for later feeding. Stockpiling fescue is one of the most cost-effective ways of reducing stored feed needs. We can assume that fescue with 60 to 80 pounds of N per acre and adequate moisture could accumulate approximately 1,800 to 2,000 pounds of utilizable forage per acre by December 1st. With proper fencing, the animals could be given a fraction of an acre every day or every other day such that you were giving them access to about 5 to 6 pounds of forage dry matter per day. This technique works extremely well with the use of electric fencing.

Another option would be to plant winter annuals such as wheat, rye, ryegrass, oats, or triticale. These can be planted in September in a prepared seed bed. Farmers can also drill winter annuals into bermuda or other summer grass pastures in October. If winter annuals are to be grazed in mid- to late-spring, ryegrass should be included in the mixture since ryegrass out-produces the small grains in the spring. Timely rains in September and adequate rains in October should allow farmers to have winter annuals for grazing by November or you could stockpile the winter annuals for later grazing. Hopefully, one or more of the strategies discussed in this article will be feasible for your farm and will help you provide adequate forage to your cattle.